

REPORT ON COURT REPORTER SCHOOLS

November 1, 2000 - Joint Legislative Sunset Review Committee Hearing

INFORMATIONAL HEARING ON COURT REPORTING SCHOOLS: Why is it taking so long for students to complete court reporting schools?

It has come to the attention of the Joint Committee that it is taking much longer for students to graduate from court reporting schools than the generally stated length of time quoted by most schools and the Board – of from 3 to 4 years. The Court Reporters Board has indicated that it may be taking, on average, about 7 years for students to qualify to sit for the state board licensing examination, and in some instances some students are taking up to 10 years and longer.

The Board has stated that this issue came to their attention beginning in January when they conducted some school site visits. As part of these site visits, the Board began checking files of former students who had passed school “qualifier examinations”¹ and had sat for the state board licensing examination for the past three years for each school. What they found, in tabulating the time enrolled in school, was an average of 7 years. Prior to this, the Board relied on what students marked on a questionnaire that was disseminated at the actual time they sat for the state board licensing examination. The Board stated that this average had been between 3 to 4 years.

The Board asserts, however, that the 7-year average is misleading to the extent that it does not subtract the amount of time for leaves of absences, vacations, parenting, and childcare. In addition, the Board claims that the student of today is markedly different from one five to fifteen years ago. “That is, the current student enrolled in school is far more likely to work full time or part-time, which slows the progress one makes in a technical school, requiring repetitive daily practice of speed-building in order to retain optimum performance.”

During the spring of this year, the Board stated that it also began to receive letters of complaint from several students from various Southern California schools. About the same time, the Joint Committee also began receiving phone calls and letters from a number of students regarding this problem.

Both current and prior students of court reporter schools, and those speaking on behalf of students, complained about the following:

- The Court Reporters Board has not been responsive to students concerns.
- The schools and the Board are misrepresenting the time it takes to complete court reporting school (2 to 4 years). If students knew how long it really takes to graduate from court reporting school (7 to 10 years) then many would not attend.
- Some students fear retribution by the schools if they complain about what a particular school is doing.

¹ Pursuant to the regulations of the Court Reporters Board, Section 2411 of the California Code of Regulations, court reporting schools are required to provide, as part of the minimum prescribed course of study, classroom instruction in the mastery of verbatim records of hearings, meetings, conventions and judicial proceedings, by means of shorthand or machine shorthand writing, and the accurate transcription of such proceedings. The student shall, upon completion of the course of study, demonstrate the ability to make a verbatim record of unfamiliar material with four-voice dictation at a speed of 200 words per minute for 15 minutes with a minimum of 97.5 percent accuracy, graded in accordance with the method by which the board grades the licensing examination which shall be known as a “qualifier” exam.

- Students are expending all of their federal grant monies and then have to obtain personal loans and still aren't graduating from court reporting schools.
- Schools are giving unfair and extremely difficult qualifier tests and dictation tests that are different from the actual state licensing examination.
- The level of difficulty in passing these tests were raised considerably when the passage rate of the state licensing examination went down.
- It is doubtful that even licensed court reporters could now pass these tests.
- Schools are using unqualified and poorly trained teachers to provide the qualifier and dictation tests.
- The Board has given court reporting schools the ability to dictate how long students will attend their schools by allowing schools to manipulate test difficulties. Schools are businesses and it is in their best interest financially to keep students as long as possible.
- As long as schools have the freedom to control the test given, and as long as the standards of passing these tests continue to differ among schools, this type of problem will never end.
- Only about 5 to 6 percent of the student body actually qualify to go to the state exam every six months.
- Many students have dropped out of school frustrated by not being able to advance or ever know when they may finally graduate from school.
- Enrollment in court reporting schools is dwindling because the word is getting out that it takes an extremely long time to graduate/qualify to take the state licensing examination.

One former student, who was a teacher for 17 years and has now passed the state licensing examination, possibly summed it up best when she made some of the following observations:

"I have never in my life encountered a more frustrating educational experience than court reporting school. It took me six years to qualify for the state exam. Speaking from personal experience, I can tell you that my self-esteem has never been lower than it was during reporting school. And most students are there at great personal sacrifice. Do they not deserve a fair shot at an achievable goal? At this point, I would never recommend to anyone that they go to court reporting school."

She closed by stating: *"The task of court reporting schools should be to train fine court reporters who will succeed in their chosen field and be a credit to their profession. Instead it seems that their goal is to keep students in school as long as possible. Enrollment in our schools is down. Word has gotten out that court reporting school is a bad investment of time and money. At a time when electronic recording is knocking at the door of our profession, it would behoove us to take a look at how our training programs are run. We need to get good court reporters out there in the field, not keep them sitting in school for years and years".*

Joint Committee staff met with Board staff and the Bureau on Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education to discuss this issue. Some initial recommendations were submitted by the Joint Committee staff to the Board for consideration.² The Joint Committee requested that the Board review these and

² Recommendations submitted by Joint Committee staff for consideration by the Board's Education Committee included the following:

1. Require information to be provided about the schools including:
 - Breakdown of student attendance and time frames to complete coursework and qualify to take the state examination.
 - Dropout rates and time spent in school before leaving.
 - Student passage rates on the state examination.
 - Placement rates in the court reporting profession or related professions.
2. Some sort of pre-test in schools to determine whether students will have the skills necessary to complete the schools requirements. And to put them on notice that it may take longer than four years to gain the accuracy necessary to pass the state examination.

other recommendations to deal with this problem and to respond to the Joint Committee by the November 1 hearing date.

As a result of this request by the Joint Committee, and to provide the Board members with information and recommendations for consideration, Board staff convened an Education Committee comprised of school administrators, students, licensees, and one attorney. The Education Committee met once on September 9, to identify specific reasons why students are taking so long to complete court reporting schools and to develop specific recommendations for the Board to consider.

In the minutes of the Education Committee meeting, Board staff indicated that there were numerous reasons as to why the length of time spent in court reporting schools has become problematic. They included enrollment versus actual attendance; student transfers to other schools; learning real-time; the dropping of phonetics in the public school system in the early 1980s and then being confronted with phonetics for the first time in court reporting school; the erosion of the work ethic in our society; the students' increasingly burdensome lifestyles rearing children, working part time, and often undergoing divorce; and finally the lack of standardization in policies from school to school.

The following are the recommendations that were contained in the minutes of the Education Committee meeting to deal with these problematic areas:

1. Require all court reporting schools to formally report to the Board the actual attendance of each candidate they send to the exam so that the Board can accurately identify how much time the average successful student takes to progress through school versus the time they are enrolled in school.
2. The Board should direct its Executive Officer to clarify to the Legislature the difference between attendance policies in public school, which operate on a semester basis, and those of private school, which operate year round. As a result, students who do not practice minimum of four hours per day on their machines find themselves needing to reestablish their writing rate upon their return to school, a factor that may slow their progress.
3. The Board should require a minimum of one annual written and oral evaluation of each student to clarify the expectations, the progress the individual student is making, and the prognosis of how much more time it will take for that student to graduate.
4. The Board should develop standardization of policies on counseling, attendance accounting, speed, length of time and accuracy rate on qualifies administered by the schools.
5. The Board should develop a brochure that would disclose the expectation level of consistent full time attendance, daily commitment to speed-building, self-motivational skills needed to complete the program within 2 to 3 years; and require that the brochure be provided to each prospective student by every Board-approved school prior to each student's enrollment.

3. Allow a student to sit for the state exam after completing the course work, and eliminate the need to pass the schools qualifier test after the fourth year. (But still allow schools to provide examinations to demonstrate proficiency in the course of study prescribed by the board.)

4. Lower the accuracy rate to 95% for the dictation portion of the state exam, which is the national standard. (Maybe lower for schools – 90% to pass the qualifier?)

6. The Board should direct its Executive Officer to provide to the Joint Committee an articulation model that would assist students in mastering the knowledge, skills and abilities used for various related professions and in selecting the career module of their choice.
7. The Board should direct its Executive Officer to explain to the Joint Committee that taking a school qualifier examination, at the same speed, length of time, and accuracy level of the Board's licensing examination, is necessary to prepare students for this exam and to minimize test-taking jitters. "Eliminating the school's qualifier examinations would be similar to sending a runner to the Olympics without having run any trials.
8. The Board should keep the current California standard for passage of the licensing examination that is based on a dictation speed of 200 words per minute for a total 10 minutes at a 97.5% accuracy rate with 4-voices, rather than use the national standard that is based on a speed of 225 words per minute for a total of 15 minutes at a 95% accuracy rate with 2-voices.
9. The Board should direct its Executive Officer to explain to the Legislature that they cannot effectively monitor students whom dropout and change careers or move to a different location.
10. The Board should publish all results of each exam by school in their newsletters and on its web page.
11. The Board should require all schools to track the placement of their graduates in the court reporting profession, but should not be required to track and place their students to related fields, due to the difficulty of this requirement. However, the Board could encourage schools to follow-up with the second category of students by phone or mail.
12. As far as establishing higher standards for teachers and greater training for readers, the Education Committee agreed that this topic needs more time for greater discussion at a different date to develop additional strategies and phrase recommendations to the Board.
13. Rather than creation of a mandatory pre-entrance exam to disqualify students who do not have sufficient skills necessary to predict successful completion, or to use such an exam to determine the placement level of students, it was recommended that the Board develop a brochure as stated in recommendation #5, and include additional elements such as increasing the number of recommended apprenticeship hours, adopting a mentor, and giving practical suggestions for resumes, cover letters, and professional attire for work.
14. Rather than eliminate the qualifier exam after 4 years of full time study, or only provide one qualifier exam at 10 minutes of sustained 4-voice dictation at 200 wpm with a 97.5% which duplicates the current standard of the Board's licensing exam, or lower the 97.5% accuracy rate to a 95% accuracy rate, the Board should instead mandate to the schools the administering to all students a choice of one qualifier exam of 15 minutes of sustained 4-voice dictation at 200 wpm with a 97.5% accuracy rate **OR two**-10 minute sustained 4-voice dictations at 200 wpm with a 97.5% accuracy rate, and that all schools must track both kinds of candidates who qualified by each method for one year to determine if one method of qualifying is more expeditious to completion for the student than the other, and report the findings to the Board.

The Board met on October 20, to consider each of the recommendations from the Education Committee and develop strategies to address this problem. The Board will present its final recommendations at the November 1 hearing.

